

[Berry-Picking]

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BERRY-PICKING

as told to

Dorothy West

Mrs A. is middle-aged Negro woman of average height, rather heavy, with straight features, ruddy brown complexion and wavy dark hair. She was born in Camden, S.C., where she received a grammar school education, and moved to Charleston, S.C. when she was married. For the last six years she has been living in New York, where her four daughters, two married, two single, live. One of her daughters is the proprietor of a beauty parlor where Mrs. A likes to spend the day, when she isn't too busy.

Her principal interests are her children and church work (she is a Methodist), but she finds that she is too busy with domestic work to get much time for church activities. Although her children all live in New York, she is beginning to be anxious to return to her home in the South, and hopes to leave as soon as her youngest daughter is married. In spite of her years in the North, her "Geechee" accent is still perceptible.

Once or twice a year, around where I lived, most women with families would pack up for three or four days and go blackberry picking. My mother had some distant relatives in a little place called Ninety-Six, not very far on the train from Camden. I remember the first time she took me to Ninety-Six when she went to pick berries.

We - she did - started getting ready about a week before we left. She boiled her Mason jars (heavy, glass quart jars for canning) and boiled the rubber collars (heavy rubber bands

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which were put on before the cap was screwed on the jar to make the canned goods airtight), and she boiled the caps to fit on the jars. Then she packed about fifteen jars and collars and caps in a big basket and in suit-cases so she could carry them without much trouble. Clothes didn't matter much. You had two or three gingham dresses and a pair of shoes and two pair of socks and that was about all.

The first time I went, my mother just took me. She left my brother and sister at home. I was the youngest and she thought she had to take me, and she didn't want to take the others because she didn't know how much room the lady where we were going to stay had. I was about seven then.

We got on the train and I guess we rode two-three-hours - trains went slower then than they do now. Ninety-Six is a little flag station and when we got there, the woman's husband where wer we were going to stay met us at the station (it was just a little shed, really) with a horse and buggy. He lived about three miles from the place where the train stopped.

When we got there, there were two other women with their children. It was always like that. More than one woman came to stay at a house during picking time. This time you went to this place, the next time, you went 2 somewhere else. And your relatives and maybe one or two of your best friends were the ones who came to pick berries together. This time I'm telling you about, there were two other women and their children. I believe (she stopped to count) there were twelve or thirteen children in that house at one time. Miss (Mrs.) Mary (her hostess) herself had seven children, I made eight, and one woman had two children, and the other one had two or three. I can't remember exactly.

We didn't do anything but play that first day. The grown folks got their jars together in the kitchen, and collected big pots and pans to put the berries in when they picked 'em. I guess they talked the rest of that day since maybe they didn't see each other more than once or twice a year. When we got ready to go to bed, the girls were put together in the parlor on pallets to sleep, and the boys were put in the dining-room. I knew there were five

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of us girls sleeping on a pallet on the floor once. I don't know where the grown folks slept. I don't remember whether they slept on pallets or not. I guess not since the children gave up their beds and slept on pallets. I do know that sometimes as many as four women slept together in one room.

We got up early in the morning and had breakfast as soon as it was light ... we had salt pork and hominy grits and hot biscuits and maybe one or two other things. Then the boys helped the women take the pans out and pile 'em in the wagon. One of the boys drove the mules, and two women sat on the seat of the wagon and the other two sat in the back with as many of the children as could go. Sometimes the other children would want to go, and they'd hang on to the side of the wagon or behind it. If you didn't have room to go, you'd just walk along behind the wagon.

You'd take food along to eat in the middle of the day because you stayed all day. Everybody would pick, the women and the children. You didn't put the berries in any special basket. You figured out how much everybody would get after you got back to the house. And everybody always got the same share. When you filled one big pan, you'd start filling another one, and you kept on 'till you'd picked as many as you could. 'Course the children ate more than they picked, and sometimes they'd run off and play.

I remember once I had on shoes and everybody else was barefooted. They called me a city chap, and they played tricks on me. Once they ran off from the grown folks and I followed 'em. We came to a little crick and they ran right on through it to the other side. I wanted to follow 'em but I had on a nice little gingham dress and shoes. They had on overalls (overalls) and no shoes so it was easy for them to get wet. I stood on the side for a minute just looking at 'em and trying to make up my mind about getting over to the other side. They got tired of waiting on me, and one of the big girls came back over and threw me in the crick. Then she ran on across and they all ran and hid. When I finally got out of the water, I couldn't find 'em anywhere. I stood there cryin' and yellin' and finally, it seemed like hours to me - they came back and got me.

When the grown folks got through picking - they always carried enough utensils to hold enough berries to keep 'em picking 'till sundown, if the children had strayed off playing, they'd holler for the children. Then going back, more had to walk or hang on because the pans would almost fill the wagon.

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That night we wouldn't do much. Everybody was tired, and we'd have a big, hot supper, and then go to bed. Sometimes the children would make a lot of noise since so many of them were together and the grown folks would have come in and stop the fuss, but most of the time the whole house was quiet by nine o'clock and everybody was asleep.

Then, the next morning the canning would start. They would put the wash pots out in the yard and start a fire under going ... most woman had at least two wash pots, and some had three and four. They were heavy old iron, black pots about two feet deep, and they stood on three squatty legs about six inches tall. Tall enough to make a hot fire under. The women used to boil their clothes in to make 'em white on wash-day. They'd fill these wash-pots with water and put the Mason jars in again to boil. Sometimes they'd let the big children take the jars out on long sticks. You see, when they boiled their clothes, they had a wooden stick - most often a broom handle - that they stirred the clothes with. They'd use this stick to put in the mouth of the jar and lift it out. When they got through sterilizing the jars, they'd pour the water out and put some more in, and then put in the berries. They used the pots for different things. I think they made jam in them and started the wine in them, but I think they made the jelly in the house in the kitchen. I don't remember that very well. They worked almost all day. Then when they were ready to divide it up, one woman would fill a jar, then another one, and so on 'till everybody had one jar full. You kept that up 'till everybody had as much as everybody else. 'Course if there was a little left over, you'd eat as much of it as you could that night for supper and the rest you left to the woman whose house you were in. You didn't give her anything for lettin' you stay there except that everybody would give her three or four quarts of jelly or jam or whatever you made.

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Nobody ever went home the night they finished canning. They'd sit around and talk, and maybe decide were they'd go to can the next time ... It was only berries or maybe watermelons if you were going to make watermelon rind preserves that you went out like that to pick and can. Peaches and apples and plums and things like that, you canned at home by yourself because you just bought whatever you wanted to put up.

The next day you went back home. I remember when we went, we were the only folks who came on the train. The others came in horse and wagons. They would leave early in the morning, and most of the time we were the last to leave because we had to wait for the train.